

What Lies We Keep

By Janet Roberts

Chapter 1

The digital screens on the kitchen appliances screamed 5:00 a.m. He knew he should crawl back into bed. It had been like this for six months now, ever since the promotion at work. Waking up with sweat across his brow and his back just before the reoccurring dream headed toward a disastrous end, as if his mind were a savvy film editor cutting out an ending he hadn't the fortitude to handle. Each time, he carefully felt the area around his body, without waking Charlotte, to make sure it wasn't so bad that the sheets were damp, and then walked as quietly as possible to the open area of their apartment housing the kitchen and small living room. No amount of effort to return to sleep worked these days. Nagging concerns that it was more premonition than dream rolled up in him with all the discomfort of a chronic stomachache. Logging into his work laptop settled his fears. Focusing on a stack of emails—a pile of problems to be solved and tasks to be completed—reassured him that he was necessary, valuable, not someone they would discard like an old rag no matter what he'd done. In his mind, there had been no way but the path he'd chosen. But words didn't seem to alleviate the mild trembling in his hands.

Lies were like that. They felt justified as a route to sparing others hurt, a path to keeping things balanced, a necessary evil. Lies spawned subsequent lies until the entangled mess required putting one's ethics on the shelf now and then to simply manage life. This was the well-worn mantra Ted told himself in the wee hours of the morning to justify how he'd moved up and into a manager role. They needed the money. Jesse needed the money. He'd put everything he held sacred on the line. He couldn't allow the twin detractors of guilt and regret to weaken his resolve. He'd done what he needed to do for the people he loved most.

It was quiet at this hour, streetlights reflecting against windshields sprinkled with soft, multicolored leaves and a touch of dew that wasn't quite frost. Late September always hinted at colder weather just around the corner. A few more hours and the neighborhood would awaken.

People brushing off the comfort of blankets and sleep would appear below to warm up vehicles parked bumper to bumper in urban uniformity along both sides of East End Avenue. Others would hurry to the bus stop to catch the 61A. The world around him stepping into the day. Ted's itch to join their ranks felt as natural as breathing. It was all he'd left his life in Montana to pursue.

Similar to the residences of most of their neighbors, the roomy but older apartment harkened back to another time. A solid brick building whose faded glory showed in the slight dip and sag of the front steps, old woodwork in need of refinishing, plumbing with ancient cast-iron pipes, and registers emitting solid boiler-powered heat. A faded, elderly lady in need of a facelift with all the architectural character Charlotte loved. Ted wished they could buy a home in the neighborhood, but he'd told Charlotte he lusted after the big, refurbished homes near Frick Park or the luxury condos on Mt. Washington. Another lie placed carefully to postpone a little bit longer her aching desire to own a home, just until he could restore the funds missing from his account at the company's credit union, which he'd drained. Thankfully, the account was in his name only. A few more months and he'd have replaced at least three quarters of what he'd felt forced to remove. His promotion to manager was making that possible.

"Tell her the truth about the ranch," Jesse had advised.

"She'll want to move back to Montana," Ted had said. "You know she has this fantasy about living there."

"Would that be so bad?" Jesse replied.

Just thinking about the endless hours in the saddle herding cattle, sore muscles from the physical labor, then falling into bed exhausted, worn out, only to do it again the next day made the muscles tighten in Ted's neck and shoulders. He felt a slight pain and, looking down, realized he'd clenched his hands at the thought of returning, to the point where tension ran all the way up his arm and into his shoulders. Jesse viewed ranch life as freedom from the chains of a rigid, corporate structure. Freedom to work for himself and to answer to himself only, to own his own destiny. Ted saw it as a beautiful trap, the land and mountains casting stunning views on a life where progress, as Ted defined it, was limited. He saw freedom in a place where his computer skills and cyber knowledge prepared an even path upward to clearly definable roles that would fund a nicer, easier life for his family. He and Jesse had had discussions about this, a few of which were heated, so they'd agreed to disagree and move on. Charlotte alternated between

agreeing with him and then with Jesse, her chronic indecision making Ted feel he was required to make the tough decisions.

“It’s not what I want. And it’s not really what she would want once she got a good taste of it,” he told Jesse, hoping to shut down the topic.

“You never know. It could turn out to be really great for both of you, and I’d love for you to live closer. You could work in Bozeman, and I’d run the ranch.”

“Yeah, we miss you too, but no, Jesse, I’m not leaving the opportunities here for some smaller place with no career path.”

“It’s your call, brother.” Jesse sounded more resigned than disapproving, tired of what was a conversation they’d had before.

“Dad should have left the ranch to you. We both know that,” Ted said. “And even if he had, I’d still be helping you when times got tough.”

“He loved you more,” Jesse answered. “We both know that too.”

Jesse, his younger brother who loved their family ranch, who lived a straight and honest life, who loved but rarely understood Ted. He wished he could be fully honest with Jesse. All this hiding secrets from people he loved, covering up old lies, creating new ones. Only a few more years and he could sign that ranch over to Jesse, shake the albatross from his shoulders along with the memories of the last words between him and his father, and move on. Another six months and he could pretend he’d settle for a house in their neighborhood and hire a realtor.

“Hey, there . . . couldn’t sleep again?” He didn’t realize Charlotte was in the living room until she slid down next to him on the couch, resting her head on his shoulder as his fingers tapped the laptop keys. “How long have you been out here?”

“About an hour, I guess.”

“You work too much.”

She looked beautiful—hair tousled, eyes drowsy as they fought the need for a little more sleep. He knew she was weary of him working long hours.

“I tried to go back to sleep and I couldn’t, so I figured I’d get some work done,” Ted said as he carefully minimized the screen and slid his hand over the USB flash drive he’d inserted earlier.

“It’s not healthy, Ted,” she replied. “We need to get you a sleeping pill or some solution to this insomnia. I’m going to ask Dr. Collins tonight.”

“The therapist can write prescriptions?” Ted fought the urge to roll his eyes, as he did, privately, about most things related to Dr. Collins. It was his first experience with a marriage counselor and, he hoped, his last. He’d agreed to go because he loved Charlotte and she thought this was the key to some sort of marital happiness. He thought otherwise but kept his comments to himself.

“She’s a licensed psychiatrist. She can prescribe medication.”

“I’d love to sleep a good eight hours,” Ted said. Dr. Collins might prove to be good for something after all, even if it came in the form of a little white pill.

Seven years of marriage and several months of marriage counseling had taught him a few things, such as when to keep his mouth shut and when to agree.

“Did you work on your list . . . for tonight?” Charlotte tapped the cover of Ted’s iPad, closed and lying on the coffee table.

“Done. Insomnia was good for something, I guess.” The marriage counselor had asked them to create a list of what they loved about each other and what drove them to the problems they’d been facing. He’d thought about objecting to what seemed a silly request that solved very little, but Charlotte had leaned forward, excited, attaching herself to the counselor’s words. “I had zero problems listing what I love about you.”

Ted smiled at her as, in a flash of memory, he could see her auburn hair lifting on the breeze while they rode horses across the land and into the mountains near his family’s ranch. His sole thought had been to wonder if she would agree to marry him as he nervously fingered the ring box in his jacket pocket. He’d envisioned a life for them with a steady income they could count on, medical benefits, a modest home of their own, children. The opposite, in his mind, of the insecurities of ranch life. They’d been halfway to that dream when his parents died in an automobile accident, and he discovered his father actually could reach back from the grave to maintain a level of control over him. Their deaths had created the uphill battle he found himself trudging along now.

“Can I see it? Your list?” Charlotte asked, reaching for his iPad.

“No, we’ll do this together, later . . . with the counselor.” Ted grabbed the iPad and popped it into his backpack, removing the USB from his work laptop at the same time. He’d need to actually create a list, quickly, during his lunch hour. “How about your list? Done?” He was a little nervous about what she might say about him tonight.

“Hmmm . . . sort of.” Charlotte stood, heading for the kitchen. He could hear her opening cupboards, pulling items to make coffee.

“I’d say you don’t trust me, which makes list-making hard, but I know where that will take the conversation.” He purposefully kept his tone light, something practice had made perfect where this topic was concerned, but he still felt an anger that never quite grew a scab and healed.

“I let that whole San Francisco trip go. You know that.” Ted watched her move around the kitchen, her back to him, alert for body language that said otherwise. Maybe arms crossing her body, biceps tightening, chewing on her nails. And then, there it was as she yanked the cabinet door so hard it banged and pulled out one, not two, coffee mugs.

Ted knew she was lying. It ate at her insecurities that he’d gotten drunk on a business trip, woke up fully clothed, his coworker Missy asleep next to him, his mind a blank as to how she’d ended up in his room. The story had trickled out, with various twists, until it reached Charlotte. He’d been explaining ever since that nothing had happened. But who was he to call anyone out on lying these days?

“We were happier in Montana,” Charlotte said. “We were more . . . more . . . I don’t know, centered? Before you took this job, we were different.”

Here we go again. Ted clutched the arm of the couch and closed his eyes, willing himself to keep the inward groan rolling up his chest from escaping through his mouth.

“We were kids then, Charlotte. Everything was easier. We’ll both be thirty years old this year, and I want to move forward, not go back,” Ted answered, hoping his voice sounded steady, calm, the opposite of the turmoil flushing his cheeks. He turned sideways on the couch, watching Charlotte move gracefully around the kitchen. “A ranch is nothing but hard work and very little money. We have a nice life here.”

This was the kind of crap he thought they should hash out in counseling and that, if Dr. Collins was as good as she claimed, their sessions would be less one-sided in favor of Charlotte. But he wasn’t about to drop a bomb in their marriage therapy sessions and start a fight. He’d decided after the first round with the good doctor that her goal was to agree with Charlotte about what key topics they should be covering and he was just along for the ride. Not that the topic of Charlotte’s ideas about living in Montana didn’t come up with the counselor, but it never moved from what Ted viewed as a fantasy lens of “living a simple life” to reality. There he sat with two women who had grown up in the city’s suburbs, their biggest childhood chore involving keeping

their bedrooms clean, as the only expert on actual ranch life in the room but deferring to Charlotte's view to keep things amenable. To Ted, simpler meant poorer. Neither Charlotte nor Dr. Collins had ever had to live that kind of life. What he'd gleaned so far in their five months of therapy was that meeting in college, dating exclusively, marrying quickly following graduation, and having a child two years later had left them unprepared for the hard work of marriage in a way that didn't appear to affect other couples they knew.

Charlotte ignored him, pulling down cereal for breakfast, bread and peanut butter to make and pack a sandwich for Kelsey's lunch, and refusing to answer. He supposed she knew it could end up in an argument and she'd rather drop it now, hash it out later. But Ted thought they could save a lot of money on therapy if they could simply talk things through without a mediator and without anger and tears. The last time he suggested this, Charlotte said they would revert to the habits they needed to break rather than chart a new course. He assumed she thought therapy would accomplish some sort of new life for them. He was relatively cynical regarding the outcome she envisioned, but he'd keep showing up and giving it a try. Somewhere within himself he knew it was a half-hearted try, and this, alone, doomed the therapy journey to a less-than-successful outcome. If he could keep his current plan on track, he'd buy a house for his family in less than a year, and that, he believed, would be a much more effective game changer than Dr. Collins.

"You have a full day today?" Ted asked.

"What?" Charlotte paused, brows pulled inward in confusion. The brewing coffee was beginning to smell good.

"You're making Kelsey a sandwich, so I thought she must be going to the kindergarten after-school program rather than home with you."

"Oh, right, right . . ." Charlotte nodded, turning back to the kitchen counter. "I'm at the museum until noon, then lunch with Leah, and I'm on a deadline for an art gallery review for the newspaper . . . plus we have counseling later. I'll pick Kelsey up a little later than usual, and then Shay said he'd babysit."

Shay, Ted's colleague at work and best friend since their move to Pittsburgh. Other than Jesse, he'd never had as close a friendship with another man. He valued Shay like a brother. Shay had run interference after the San Francisco debacle, but he'd warned Ted that one more mistake that big and Charlotte would leave.

Ted walked into the kitchen and poured cream into the bottom of a mug, then added the coffee, one of the few habits he'd picked up from his father.

"Can you grab a coffee and sit with me before we go our separate ways?" Ted asked.

Charlotte's face softened, and she brought her mug—black, no sugar, he knew—with her, sitting down slowly, careful not to spill the hot liquid. He took her hand and squeezed, feeling the current between them he'd felt on their first date, a connection that all the ups and downs in their lives had not yet diminished, even when they chose to ignore it out of anger or disappointment in one another.

"Before my job, we were poor," Ted said. "We agreed Pittsburgh had better opportunities. You wanted to be near family, but now you rarely make any effort to see them beyond asking if they will babysit Kelsey."

"You know how difficult my mother can be, Ted," Charlotte responded. "And be honest . . . you don't really like my family all that much."

"I like some of them . . . maybe not your mother," Ted answered jokingly, hoping to lighten the mood with what was usually their mutual annoyance with Charlotte's mother. "The ranch should belong to Jesse. He loves Montana. He loves his life. And we can always visit."

"Should belong?" Charlotte was staring at him now, that questioning look she got when she was working on a new story for the newspaper crossing her face. "Art left the ranch to Jesse because you didn't want it."

"Right," Ted said, quickly covering the slip. "I meant the ranch should always belong to Jesse."

"Yeah, of course," Charlotte said.

It saddened Ted to see the wistful expression on his wife's face. If he kept pushing this conversation, he would open the door to something unpleasant.

"Let's talk about Montana vs. Pittsburgh with Dr. Collins, okay?" Ted hoped he could find a way to convey that moving to Montana wasn't necessary. Charlotte and Kelsey did not take a back seat to his work life, as she often claimed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Everything he'd done, everything he was doing, was for the wife and daughter he could not imagine life without and the younger brother he loved deeply. Jesse deserved that ranch, and Charlotte deserved to own rather than rent a home.

Charlotte nodded and gave him a tired half smile.

“Finish up that coffee. I’m going to take a shower,” Ted said, standing and heading toward the hallway leading to the bedrooms and bathroom. He wanted to wash it all away, the sleepless nights, the lies he’d just told, yet again, woven into the fabric of the ancient lies his father had dumped on his shoulders.

“Don’t be late tonight, Ted,” Charlotte called out behind him.

She’d laid down the rules months ago. Go to marriage counseling, or she was taking Kelsey and moving out. He hadn’t missed a session, and he wouldn’t, no matter what the day would bring.